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Stop Blaming the Unvaccinated

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Excerpt: If we really want to control this pandemic, we need to think of broad systemic changes which involve more vaccinations, yes, but also ways of actually taking care of everyone, including those infected and unvaccinated.

There's been a lot of fuss lately about the unvaccinated, and much of the discourse is filled with hatred, heartlessness, and phobia. Consider the words of **Alabama Governor Kay Ivey < https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/23/alabama-governor-covid-vaccinations-500638>** , who stated bluntly that it's "time to start blaming the unvaccinated folks, not the regular folks"

and that "it's the unvaccinated folks that are letting us down." Ivey is a Republican, but this sentiment and even these exact words are echoed across the political spectrum and across a range of news outlets and social media, all of which throb with mockery and outright anger directed at the unvaccinated. But blaming the unvaccinated for a pandemic that is the consequence of centuries of exploitative systems which breed a callous disregard for human life is like blaming Donald Trump for all the ills of "America." If we really want to control this pandemic, we need to think of broad systemic changes which involve more vaccinations, yes, but also ways of actually taking care of everyone, including those infected and unvaccinated.

Trump's election in 2016 was a boon to liberals and even several leftists who seized upon his presidency as the single reason why the United States was in such poor shape. For instance: for several decades now, immigration in this country has been stuck in a quagmire with no way out for over **12 million undocumented people < https://yasminnair.com/daca-was-always-doa-lets-end-it-now/>** . Even those here seeking permanent residency or citizenship as "legal" immigrants have to wait for years in limbo. That's largely the fault of useless but rapacious immigration rights organisations who push for useless, half-measures like DACA because any real solutions to the crisis would actually put them out of business (see my "**DACA Was Always DOA < https://yasminnair.com/daca-was-always-**

doa-lets-end-it-now/> " for more). Trump, with his openly xenophobic statements about immigrants, provided an excuse for what I call IRIC, the immigration rights industrial complex, which now happily blamed Trump for a problem that *it* helped create. Consider any other matter, including the exploitation of workers, the crisis in homelessness and housing, a crumbling infrastructure, an educational system that is dwindling to such an extent that entire swaths of the population receive a less than mediocre education, and so much more: everything could now be blamed on Trump as if history and Time itself had begun on January 20, 2017.

In the time of the Pandemic, the Unvaccinated have taken the place of Trump. They're being blamed for a health crisis when the explosion in infections is a direct result of a lack of common sense in the newly installed Joe Biden administration (and many decades of a broken health system that has left individuals and families in generational health crises in poverty and without access to healthcare). The uptick in cases and hospitalisations tend to occur among the newly infected, yes, but there are also breakthrough infections of the much more contagious and potentially lethal Delta variant. The official line is that Delta among the vaccinated is "less severe" but that's blatantly contradicted by several cases all of us are hearing of, of people we know personally who are suffering shattering symptoms and then the effects of Long Covid even *after* full vaccinations.

At some point we have to ask: when do we stop using the line about "rare exceptions" to ignore a) how devastating those exceptional cases can be for individuals and b) that it may actually be an untruth, even if it's the result of insufficient data and not malicious propaganda on the part of a desperate power structure that just wants economic systems to flourish even at the cost of lives (which is what I believe)? None of this is unexpected and could have been easily averted if Biden had instituted a nationwide mask mandate and made sure that at least 75 percent of the country was vaccinated *before* telling people they could take off their masks. Instead, after caving in to a typically American desire to be delusional and selfish about "normalcy," here we are with the frightening prospect of sliding back to square one. Biden, who has still to take action on anything like healthcare for all now calls this a "pandemic of the unvaccinated."

I've received both my shots (after a near-meltdown because the Chicago system was so frighteningly incompetent at the time, which I discuss **here < https://yasminnair.com/update-july-6/>** and **here < https://yasminnair.com/a-mask-is-a-paper-bag-for-your-eggs/>**). But I still wear my mask outside and in indoor spaces, given the reports of a rise in the Delta variant, because I don't trust strangers to be vaxxed even if they say they are. In this, I'm simply following common sense patterns that queers taught themselves during the AIDS epidemic. In random sexual encounters with strangers, never trust

anyone who tells you they're "okay" or "clean": if a condom is not accepted, exit calmly and without drama and without wasting time on a crash course on sex ed for a goddamn adult. I feel the same way about masking among strangers: I don't care about who you are, or what your feelings about my mask are—I know nothing about you to make me trust you, the Delta variant can be transmitted even by the asymptomatic so, yes, my mask isn't coming off, and I'm not here to educate you on the science of all this.

And yet, the discourse around masking today positions the masked as weird anomalies from another land and time, to be avoided as potentially unvaccinated loonies. My local Whole Foods has a sign that says that masks for the *vaccinated* are no longer required and that the *unvaccinated* are asked to stay masked. This leaves no discursive or real space for those of us who prefer to keep our masks on even after vaccinations, and we're left to walk around with people staring at us. Staff members include both the masked and unmasked, and I wonder what it's like to be the clerks at the checkout registers who stay masked while in constant contact with lines of mostly unmasked people. What is it like to face the mocking stares of people while you fill their bags or, worse, have to answer their possibly intrusive questions?

Signs like the one at Whole Foods reflect the easy way in which focusing on the unvaccinated, or those who might appear to be

unvaccinated, allow everyone to forget that the pandemic is far from over, that there are still significant health risks with not masking as variants begin to rise, and that the root causes of COVID stretch back over time to systemic breakdowns that have nothing to do with who chooses or not to be vaccinated. Whether or not a person is masked is beside the point in a country that wilfully and deliberately refuses to mandate healthcare for all.

The demonisation of the unvaccinated continues even after their deaths. A spate of recent stories, **like this one < https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2021/07/23/hillsong-church-stephen-harmon-dies-covid-19-unvaccinated/>** , are about unvaccinated people who died of COVID and either regretted it or died still refusing to believe in it. It's hard to miss the gleeful tone in most of the reporting, and social media feeds are full of people who seem happy that others have died morbidly horrible deaths. Overall, the response seems to be, "These people deserved to die."

Through it all, we continue with a system where frontline workers like nurses and teachers at all levels, the ones keeping us alive and educated, are the ones forced to put their lives at risk. At places like Whole Foods, it's easy to assume that all workers who stay unmasked do so "voluntarily" but we forget about the implicit pressures to conform to coworkers, or to bosses who might model certain kinds of behaviour.

And much of the logic around unmasking defies scientific logic. As I've said **before < https://yasminnair.com/july-20-update/>** , we're ignoring simple rules of transmission and how it occurs: waitstaff forced to work with hordes of unmasked customers commute back and forth between their restaurants and their homes. People driving in and out of states with variable rates of infection can be asymptomatic carriers. You might be in a "small group of friends" and have no idea which one is an asymptomatic carrier. And despite the twaddle being parroted by talking head physicians (I count Dr. Anthony Fauci as one), *you* have *no idea* if the Delta variant will glide through you like a knife through warm butter or like a wrecking ball through a building. Viral loads in Delta infections are a ***thousand* times higher < https://virological.org/t/viral-infection-and-transmission-in-a-large-well-traced-outbreak-caused-by-the-delta-sars-cov-2-variant/724>** than those in the earlier strain, but we think it's okay to mandate that children who cannot yet be vaccinated should return to badly maintained public schools and that Chicago should host festivals like Lollapalooza for as many as 400,000. And all of this, to repeat, in a country where healthcare is not a right.

All our systems are broken, possibly beyond repair in a country that—regardless of the ideology of its ruling party—places more value on normalising economic systems than on ensuring the health and safety of its people. The unvaccinated are lumped together as a faceless,

ignorant mass but as pediatrician and public health advocate **Dr. Rhea Boyd points out in an interview with Ed Yong in *The Atlantic* < https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2021/07/unvaccinated-different-anti-vax/619523/>** , even the *vaccinated* are dubious about the efficacy of vaccines, and the unvaccinated often have perfectly legitimate questions about safety and protocols.

I would push further and say that even those refusing to be vaccinated because they are in fact deeply ignorant about basic science should not be treated as if they deserve to die. The US is home to some of the world's top scientific research institutions but the extent of the scientific illiteracy of its population is astounding: **70 percent cannot understand the science section of the *New York Times* < https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/02/070218134322.htm>** . No one on the left or right is willing to examine this fact too closely as a contributor to COVID because to do so would result in a social media uproar about elitism. Plus, neither the left nor the right will admit that the world of publishing and discourse in general— which is to say, the world that churns out op-eds about the unvaccinated—is dominated by people of all ideologies who've attended elite institutions, the sort where students actually receive excellent science education. Contempt for the unvaccinated as an unwashed, uneducated lot doesn't just not reflect the material reality of who they might be: it reflects the class divisions between

commentators and those commented upon.

What might be the way forward? To start with, we have to keep pushing for systemic change that includes structural repairs to our systems, and those have to include matters that seem unrelated to COVID, like transportation and education. I had to shell out a total of nearly $100 for rideshare costs over four trips back and forth for both my shots because getting to the Walgreens that was dispensing them would have taken too long. I use a cane which makes traveling hard enough and…I thought it would be viciously ironic if I ended up infected on a crowded bus while trying to get vaccinated. I was fortunate to have the resources at the time but even a year earlier, I would have had to ask friends for help and I know there are many people in similar situations who simply could not have afforded to make the trips (Chicago has since ramped up its vaccination efforts and even makes in-home appointments, but there are still no multilingual PSAs and other necessary efforts). If we didn't have an educational system based on the ridiculous idea that only people with money deserve good schools and education, we might not be faced with such a massive amount of ignorance about COVID. If we had an excellent healthcare system in a country that instead proudly creates billionaires who hurtle into space for 660 seconds and then, alas, return, we wouldn't have seen so many die in such shocking ways. Systems are interconnected, bodies are porous, and viruses mutate constantly,

seizing upon all opportunities to multiply and proliferate.

It's not up to us as individuals to educate those who are wilfully or otherwise ignorant just as it's not up to you to deliver impromptu sex ed lessons to fools who won't use condoms with strangers. We're also not required to demonstrate compassion or sympathy for those refusing to get vaccinated—there's a brewing discourse online about "reaching out" to them and this is, frankly, rubbish. If you're particularly close to someone and want to spend the time "reaching out," fine, but the rest of us are under no obligation to undertake such an effort. It's time to stop seeking these sorts of affective and emotional responses and, instead, focus on systemic problems. The opposite of love and compassion is not hatred. We don't have to be emotional at all — hell, we don't even have to think about how we feel about the unvaccinated. We need to think about what it is *everyone* needs. As I've emphasised, our only organising principle needs to be: **What do people need and how do we get it to them < https://evergreenreview.com/read/a-manifesto/>** ? Maybe, when someone dies a horrible death, we could spend less time gloating over them and more thinking about how and why so many people are so suspicious of vaccines in the first place. More importantly, we could build better systems to make sure vaccines can get to those who need and want them.

We have to institute masking and distancing mandates for all indoor spaces. At the same time, we *have* to support businesses and individuals so that they can make it through difficult times with payrolls, rent, and so much more. Jeff Bezos's dick trip was not a privately funded matter: it was paid for a network of subsidies that go unseen when we think of billionaires as "self-made" men. There are no "private" space trips just as there are no **"private" universities < https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardvedder/2018/04/08/there-are-really-almost-no-truly-private-universities/?sh=492ed3bb57bc>** . If we can find such creative ways for Bezos to fund a $6 billion trip that lasted 11 minutes, we can figure out a way to make the ultra-wealthy cough up enough in taxes to fund the programs we need to help people live *without* simply making them donate the money to us (the entire system of philanthropy is rotten and needs to be set on fire or just sent off into space on the tip of that giant dickrocket).

The pandemic was never over, it was never going to be over, and no amount of wishful thinking on the part of a Biden administration will make it over without profound systemic changes. The U.S is part of the world and it's part of the problem because it refuses to share vaccine technology and aid in distribution efforts, as **Gregg Gonsalves pointed out on *Democracy Now* < https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7**

/26/covid19_pandemic_vaccinnation_masks_gregg_gonsalves>. As Amy Goodman pointed out in the same episode, much of the *world* is unvaccinated even as it desperately wants vaccines. As long as the world remains largely unvaccinated, no one is safe or invulnerable. We have to think long and hard about what that means without resorting to the usual xenophobia.

It's time to stop blaming the Unvaccinated and it's also time to stop talking about "reaching out." Both discourses contribute nothing to solving a problem. Whether we want to admit it or not, we're on this particular ship for a *minimum* of two years, at this rate. If Americans as a people and the United States as a country don't end their isolationist, petulant, selfish ways and start to think of themselves as part of a larger world, we—the world—could potentially be here forever. Our best hope at this point is to return to masking and social distancing indoors, make vaccinations easy to obtain, continue creating better systems and get more vaccinations into more people here and across the world without constantly stopping to engage in rage-filled invectives that only help us feel smug. But without all this as the bare minimum, we're simply looking at endless years of death and more death and no amount of blaming the Unvaccinated is going to bring about any state of "normal."

So many dream of returning to "normal"—a world of such desperate

inequalities and ravaged humanity that the world's richest country is hurtling towards 50 million dead from COVID alone in a matter of months. Stopping to blame people rather than create better systems denies us a world filled with infinitely better possibilities than the mere "normal." "Normal" should never be enough.

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See also my comrade **Bob Perillo's post < https://www.facebook.com/bob.perillo.5/posts/10225763137210872>** .

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